

**Armenian Assembly of America, Submitted by Bryan Ardouny, Executive Director
Prepared for the Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs
U.S. assistance and policy in the South Caucasus region**

Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Leahy, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, the Armenian Assembly of America seeks to strengthen the U.S. relationship with Armenia and Artsakh, and maximize the effectiveness of U.S. assistance. Established in 1972, the Armenian Assembly is the largest Washington-based organization promoting public understanding and awareness of Armenian issues. The Assembly's extensive experience in Armenia, working closely with key government agencies, officials, and charitable organizations, provides us with unique insight on how U.S. assistance can best advance policy goals in the region. We strongly encourage Members to travel to Armenia to see first-hand the realities on the ground and the impact of U.S. policy, as well as the consequences of the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR (FY) 2018

ASSISTANCE TO ARMENIA – The Assembly urges the Subcommittee to allocate not less than \$40 million in U.S. assistance to Armenia. Armenia was the first country to adopt Christianity as its official state religion in 301 A.D. Throughout the centuries, Armenians have maintained their faith even during 70 years of oppressive Soviet rule. Today, despite the dual blockades imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia continues to show its resilience, including in the economic sphere. Armenia was ranked 33rd out of 186 countries reviewed by the Wall Street Journal-Heritage Foundation 2017 Index of Economic Freedom – well above other countries in the region. Armenia also met the FY 2014, 2015, and 2016 eligibility requirements for the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and was identified as a candidate country in FY 2017. **The Armenian Assembly strongly supports a second U.S.-Armenia compact.** Both the European Union and the United States praised the Armenian people for the parliamentary elections that took place this year with America stating “The U.S. Embassy congratulates the people of Armenia on their April 2 parliamentary election, following a period of widespread competition among various parties and blocs in an environment that allowed all viewpoints access to the media. Election day was generally calm and orderly across Armenia and voters were able to freely exercise their right to vote. The U.S. Embassy concurs with the preliminary conclusions of the OSCE’s Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Mission which assessed elections to have been well administered and fundamental freedoms generally respected, while noting the elections ‘were tainted by credible information about vote-buying’ and pressure on voters.” Last year, the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, and Germany pledged to fund concrete measures designed to improve confidence in the election process and help prevent fraud. U.S. funding supported agreements signed by the Armenian government and three leading opposition parties on voting conduct for the April 2017 elections.

In addition to Armenia’s democracy building, the United States has spoken clearly about the need for Turkey to lift its more than 20-year blockade of Armenia and establish diplomatic relations, both of which are also required under international treaties. Despite Turkey’s public commitment

to normalize relations without preconditions, as evidenced by the signing of the Protocols between Turkey and Armenia under international auspices in October 2009, the Turkish government failed to do so. As both former Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry have indicated, the ball is in Turkey's court. Instead of moving forward, Turkey delayed consideration and sought to add new conditions. Moreover, working in tandem with Turkey, Azerbaijan torpedoed the Protocols signed with Armenia. Azerbaijan also continues its blockade of Armenia and Artsakh in lock-step with Turkey. **We, therefore, urge the adoption of new report language requiring a full accounting of the measures the United States has taken and the responses therein to eliminate the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades of Armenia and Artsakh.** We must and can do more to ensure that the last closed border from the Cold War is open. Continued and robust assistance helps to offset the impact of these blockades, and reflects America's values.

ASSISTANCE TO ARTSAKH (formerly Nagorno Karabakh) – The Assembly appreciates and welcomes the ongoing support that the United States provides to Artsakh as it rebuilds from the war launched against it by Azerbaijan and further strengthens its democratic institutions. Given the ongoing humanitarian and development needs facing the people of Artsakh including health, transportation infrastructure, education, de-mining, drinking water, and sanitation projects, **the Assembly urges not less than \$8 million be allocated in the FY 18 Bill.** For a relatively small investment, America has the opportunity to make a significant difference in the everyday lives of the people of Artsakh.

SECTION 907 OF THE FREEDOM SUPPORT ACT – The United States took a principled stand against Azeri aggression by adopting Section 907, which stated that no U.S. funds may be “provided to the Government of Azerbaijan until the President determines, and so reports to the Congress, that the Government of Azerbaijan is taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.” Instead of complying with Section 907, Azerbaijan has shown its willingness to flaunt U.S. and international law, and continues to violate Section 907 by taking military action against Armenia and Artsakh, including last April's unprecedented offensive that started with the killing of a 12-year-old boy, and continued with the gruesome ISIS-style beheadings of three soldiers and the mutilation of an elderly Armenian couple. Despite the signed 1994 cease-fire agreement, Azerbaijan's president has said he will continue firing on Artsakh and Armenia. Azerbaijan's rhetoric has been left unabated for far too long and is now matched by its deadly cease-fire violations. In fact, Azerbaijan's violations have skyrocketed, and include the inexplicable and repeated targeting of a kindergarten in Armenia's Tavush border region as well as other civilian areas, not to mention continual acts of vandalism, such as the destruction of centuries-old Armenian cemeteries noted for their historic monuments. **The United States should directly condemn such actions and avoid engaging in false equivalency between the aggressor and those defending themselves. Thus, the Assembly urges the Subcommittee to suspend the waiver granted in the aftermath of 9-11 pursuant to then-Secretary of State Colin Powell's request for flexibility to counter terrorist elements and organizations operating in Azerbaijan – and to fully enforce Section 907.** Further, given Azerbaijan's military expenditures, which are reported to exceed the entire national budget of Armenia, the major discrepancy between Azerbaijan's arms purchases and

excesses over arms control commitments, and the unconscionable pardon of an Azeri officer (Ramil Safarov) who brutally murdered an Armenian officer (Gurgen Margaryan) at a NATO Partnership-for-Peace training exercise, the Assembly urges the cessation of U.S. military assistance to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan does not need it, and America cannot afford it.

THE PEACE PROCESS – The United States, as a Co-Chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, has a vested interest in advancing peace and bringing stability to the region. The governments of Armenia and Artsakh have consistently indicated their desire to peacefully resolve the conflict, and have offered confidence-building measures to help reduce tensions and build trust. Azerbaijan, however, has chosen a different path – one of blockade, bellicose rhetoric, deadly cease-fire violations, and attempts to isolate Armenia as evidenced by Azerbaijan’s counterproductive stance to the Armenia-Turkey Protocols. The OSCE Minsk Group needs to adopt a policy which assigns responsibility to the party violating the cease-fire, as it notably did last month when they publicly called out Azerbaijan’s violation: “According to information collected from multiple reliable sources, on 15 May, Azerbaijani armed forces fired a missile across the Line of Contact, striking military equipment.”

In view of the escalation of deadly cease-fire violations by Azerbaijan, including Azerbaijan’s military offensive in April 2016, the Assembly supports the bipartisan initiative of House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce and Ranking Member Eliot Engel to de-escalate tensions and promote peace through several concrete steps, including: 1) an agreement from all sides not to deploy snipers along the line of contact; 2) the placement of OSCE-monitored, advanced gunfire-locator systems and sound-ranging equipment to determine the source of attacks along the line of contact; and 3) the deployment of additional OSCE observers along the line of contact to better monitor cease-fire violations. The U.S. Co-Chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, along with Armenia and Artsakh have expressed support for this approach. The Assembly supports the bipartisan request of 25 Members of the House to ensure not less than \$20 million to implement the Royce-Engel initiative as well as other such confidence-building measures to help facilitate a peaceful resolution of the Artsakh conflict. In addition, the Assembly strongly believes that Artsakh’s participation in direct negotiations should be restored as any solution to the conflict requires the consent of the people and leadership of Artsakh. The Assembly also urges the U.S. Co-Chair to the OSCE Minsk Group to uphold the fundamental principles of democracy, the right to self-determination and other basic human rights. Finally, the Assembly urges that the U.S. Department of State remove any official or unofficial restrictions on U.S.-Artsakh relations.

ASSISTANCE TO CHRISTIAN MINORITIES AT RISK IN THE MIDDLE EAST – The Assembly has consistently sounded the alarm on this issue long before it garnered world attention for the crisis that it is today. We remain deeply concerned about the ongoing unrest and violence in Syria and throughout the region, and its impact on minority populations caught in the middle fleeing for their lives and seeking refuge in new lands. We applaud the Near East Foundation – the successor to the congressionally chartered Near East Relief organization, which helped save tens of thousands orphaned by the Armenian Genocide – for its important work today in helping resettle those fleeing from persecution and war. **The Near East Foundation’s (NEF) work represents**

America at its best, and its programs in Jordan and Lebanon should be expanded with U.S. assistance to include Armenia, which according to The Economist has taken on the third largest number of refugees in Europe as a proportion of its population. “As a host country, Armenia has been absolutely exemplary in terms of the ratio of welcomed Syrian-Armenian refugees to the number of native inhabitants,” according to the UNHCR Representative in Armenia. Armenia hosts six Syrian refugees per 1,000 nationals – a ratio much higher than many European countries or the United States, especially noteworthy given the country’s economic circumstance.

The Assembly strongly believes that Christian and other minority communities must be afforded protection and safeguarded wherever they happen to reside. Having been targeted for annihilation in the twentieth century, Armenians are deeply troubled that 100 years later descendants of genocide survivors in Iraq and Syria are facing similar atrocities today.

U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE – Given Armenia’s ongoing support to America before and after 9-11, and including Armenia’s participation in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, Lebanon, and Mali, the Assembly supports the bipartisan request of 25 Members of the House for \$11 million in military assistance to Armenia. Such assistance not only further strengthens Armenia’s NATO Partnership for Peace (PFP) activities, but also supports NATO interoperability and modernization of Armenia’s Peacekeeping Brigade. Last year, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg thanked Armenia for its contributions to NATO’s missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo. The Secretary General also highlighted Armenia’s sustained cooperation with NATO in the areas of defense reform, enhanced interoperability, defense education reform, and civil emergency planning. NATO desk officer for the South Caucasus Steffen Elgersma also called Armenia’s contribution to international security “very impressive.”

ASSISTANCE TO THE SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETI REGION OF GEORGIA – Building on U.S. assistance already provided to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia through the Millennium Challenge Compact, the Assembly strongly supports targeted assistance for economic development and job-creation programs in Samtskhe-Javakheti.

CONCLUSION – On behalf of the Assembly and the Armenian American community, I would like to express our sincere gratitude to Congress for its assistance to Armenia and Artsakh. We gratefully remember the support the U.S. provided to Armenia after the 1988 earthquake and as the nation moved boldly toward independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, during Artsakh’s struggle for freedom and democracy, and for America’s proud record of humanitarian intervention during the 1915 Armenian Genocide. The enduring and natural bonds that exist between the United States and Armenia are readily apparent in Armenia’s ongoing support for America. Armenians in Armenia and Artsakh consider the United States a close friend and ally. This is a relationship that spans families and generations across the three countries. Given its central location, Christian heritage, entrepreneurial spirit and western value system, Armenia is poised to play a pivotal role in helping the United States achieve its stated policy objectives in the region. The Armenian Assembly greatly appreciates your attention to these policy matters and looks forward to working with the distinguished Members of the Subcommittee throughout the 115th Congress.